

Spiritual — it can mean good or bad

"Whenever I see or hear the word 'spiritual,' it makes me grit my teeth," said a friend of mine, who teaches philosophy in a nearby college. "It's become the favorite word of people who don't even understand what it means."

I quite agreed with him. The word "spiritual," used in its popular sense, has come to mean the opposite of "physical." Anything that is "spiritual" is good, is positive, is virtuous, is desirable, is loftier than the merely physical.

This is not only nonsense — it is dangerous nonsense. Just as physical things can be either good or bad, so spiritual things can be either good or bad. The word itself is quite neutral, and has no intrinsic value.

Indeed, as C. S. Lewis pointed out in his book, "Christian Behavior," some years ago: "The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, or bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred."

Most of the evil in the world has been generated on the spiritual level: a power-driven and hate-obsessed man like Hitler had no interest in physical pursuits; he was as abstemious as a monk, and as dedicated to the diabolic (which is a spiritual thing) as the monk is to the divine.

The people who create the mischief and the sorrow in the world are not the libertines and the drinkers and the wastrels; they are pathetic people who create, at the most, private tragedy. The vast public tragedies are created by the men who are dominated by some perverse spiritual drive — by pride, by anger, by hostility, by envy.

True spirituality is as rare as true bestiality in human beings. And those few who achieve it are those who are terribly aware of the perils of spirituality — who know, as the Romans warned us, that a corruption of the best becomes the worst. Which is why, to quote Lewis again, "Of all bad men, the bad religious man is the worst."

Unlike most other religions, both Judaism and Christianity accept the goodness of physical things, and do not dismiss them as delusions or devices of the devil. And those who despise the physical too often use their "spirituality" as a bludgeon for punishing the weak, while they themselves revel in the pleasures of pride, of power, of exactly those "spiritual" qualities that define the nature of their enemy the devil.